

# Green Health Prescribing: it's role in Lothian's COVID recovery



## Workshop 2 Summary

### Green Health Prescribing success stories

Tuesday 10th November 2pm - 3:30 pm

We all know how much better we feel, both mentally and physically, after some time in nature and the evidence base for green health activities is strong. A development project has been funded by Edinburgh and Lothian's Health Foundation to establish what needs to be in place to enable people most affected by COVID to experience those benefits.

Nearly 50 people attended the second in a series of workshops to discuss and learn from green health prescribing success stories. Attendees represented a diverse range of sectors and organisations and all shared an interest in how we can use nature to improve health and wellbeing.

This document summarises what we have learnt so far. For further information please join the discussion on the Green Health Prescribing Network on Microsoft Teams by contacting [rachel.hardie@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:rachel.hardie@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk) or [ian.mackenzie@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:ian.mackenzie@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk).

## What did we do?

The aim of the workshop was to hear stories of successful approaches to embedding and promoting Green Health Prescribing to help us develop a shared understanding of how: 1) Green Health Prescribing can contribute to improving outcomes for people; 2) we can take action across the system to embed and promote Green Health Prescribing.

To inspire us, we first heard from Rashpal Nottay about her walking group that she established after experiencing a serious health incident several years ago. Six examples where green health prescribing had worked were then shared in six break-out rooms. Attendees were then invited to share learning from their own stories. Matter of Focus <https://www.matter-of-focus.com/> facilitated the session.

## Who was there?

48 people from a range of professions and sectors attended the online workshop from a wide range of health and care settings and green health providers with broad geographical spread across Lothian. There is a separate engagement plan to learn from people with lived experiences of green health activities, but we heard someone's personal story at this workshop.

The following sectors and organisations were represented:

Health and care sector: *GPs, Practice Managers, Wellbeing practitioners and Community Link Workers, Cardiac Rehabilitation, Volunteer support organisations, Community Mental Health Team, Health in Mind, SAMH, Self-Directed Support, Space and Broomhouse Hub, Home care, EVOC, MEHIS,*

*THRIVE, Health all Round, Health Agency, Mayfield Development, Public Health Practitioners, Alzheimer Scotland, Weight Management Service, East of Scotland Partnership for Prevention and Remission of Diabetes, Older People's Planning, Learning Disabilities, Pharmacy, Equality and Diversity, Planning Officer for Carers, VOCAL, Assistant Programme Managers, Practice Nurse Team Leader*

*Green health activity providers: Sport and Leisure, RSPB Nature Prescription, Redhall Walled Garden, Ranger Service, Edinburgh and Lothians Greenspace Trust, Health in Mind, Rowan project, Social Farms and Gardens, TCV, Venture Trust, Cyrenians, Parks and Greenspace, Branching Out, Edible Estates, Ageing Well, Cycling UK, Polbeth and West Calder Community Garden*

*Greenspace and health: Green Health Partnerships, greenspace scotland, NatureScot, Scottish Forestry*

## **What did we learn?**

### **Story 1 – Working with a GPs cluster to prescribe health walks in Midlothian**

As Ageing Well Coordinator in Midlothian, Vivian Wallace shared the story of her Health Walks funded by the NHS, available to people aged over 50, which have been running for 20 years. She told us that even 20 years ago, one of the issues being identified was how to get local GPs to recommend the service to their patients and it has been on the agenda ever since. Despite efforts to promote the service using fliers and posters in surgeries, targeting diabetes nurses and sending letters, no increase in referrals has happened.

So the success story for engagement was that Vivian attended a GP Cluster meeting to present on the Health Walks, **listened to the GPs concerns** (they don't have enough time, don't want lots of paperwork) and asked them the best way to do it. They came up with the fit-scription model – like a prescription pad. The GP hands the fit-scription to the patient who then contacts the Ageing Well service. The **model was approved** and pads distributed to all practices, they had just started getting referrals, and COVID hit. She is hoping once things get back to normal, it can resume.

### **Story 2 - Building a sense of community by engaging a practice population**

Peter Churn, GP at Harbour Medical Practice in East Lothian, shared his experience of setting up health walks led by him. The practice wanted to engage with the community and increase their presence. They made some videos around keeping yourself healthy when you have certain health conditions and started advertising a walking and talking group. They advertised these walking sessions in the surgery (pre-COVID) and on Facebook and used a **mix of communication mechanisms**. Their aspiration is to have everything outside: outside yoga, have your lunch outside, waiting room outside. Felt a **sense of community spirit** was an outcome from these walks as it got people together. A paper outlining Pete's experiences of the walks was published in 2020:

<https://bjgp.org/content/70/690/29>

### Story 3 - Piloting “Nature Prescriptions” in built up urban areas

Elaine Bradley outlined the recent RSPB Nature Prescriptions pilot project that has been set up in Edinburgh. It will run for 5 months and is being evaluated by the RSPB.

RSPB had previously run a Nature prescriptions project with the 10 GP surgeries in Shetland and wanted to test if the same approach would work in an urban setting. They developed an Edinburgh leaflet and calendar that highlighted local information that GPs could use in their consultation with patients. This work focuses on nature connectedness and personal journeys rather than group greenspace activities. If the GPs think it is appropriate, then they can offer this as a “Nature Prescription”

5 GPs surgeries in North Edinburgh were recruited for the pilot and provided with resources to pass onto patients. The people who received the “Nature Prescriptions” were selected by the GPs if they thought that it would benefit them alongside other treatments.

The GPs have reported that so far this approach has **made them feel good** and in fact they have used the recommendations to help improve their own mental health. As this is the start of the pilot no information on how the patients feel is yet available.

The pilot has found that **GPs may not know what natural assets there are in their local area**, so the leaflet helped them. This shows that there is a possibility that this approach could also help staff wellbeing. RSPB learnt that there is a large demand for this type of local information. Practice staff may not have a **detailed knowledge of what resources are available locally**.

### Story 4 – Unlocking the power of group activities to create connections

Nicola Cole from SAMH’s Redhall Walled Garden in Edinburgh shared the story of the positive benefit their therapeutic horticultural project had on one person. The project supported an individual who was referred to them from another third sector organisation. The person was struggling with their mental health arising from issues relating to housing and employment. They had difficulty leaving the house, and were fearful of neighbours.

Once at Redhall, this individual engaged with a number of services on offer, in particular art classes, and group gardening. Initially, the person felt very anxious but over time and as result of continuous engagement this lessened, and they were made to feel part of the team and supported. The person gained the benefit of camaraderie and meaningful relationships, alongside **informal peer support and networks**. They also learned skills from using machinery.

One of the key things they did differently was used public transport to commute to Redhall - this had been inconceivable prior to accessing the service. In addition, through engagement with different organisations, they were rehoused and their home life is now a lot more settled. They have improved mental health with less frequent and less severe panic attacks. Importantly they realised that they had a voice.

Learning points for the future are:

- **It can take a while to get people to a ‘good’ point** - sometimes this means adapting what we do, but we can’t always accommodate
- The aim is just to make sure that people have a really nice day
- The **power of being in a group** - it doesn’t sound like much but it’s really important

## Story 5 - Developing the “secret garden” to bring people together

Phil Morris, Health in Mind, and Margaret Fox, person with lived experience, shared their story of turning an overgrown neglected space into a shared community resource through the ROWAN programme in Midlothian. The ROWAN programme developed after a successful Branching Out programme, and now has about 20 volunteers.

The ROWAN programme were asked to take on a garden space in Dalkeith. The garden had lost control and they had to cut down thistles and brambles that were taller than them. “I remember the day we took everyone down to this space – and I said ‘it’ll be great’ – we called it our secret garden. It was an existing garden – it just needed to be revived. They developed the garden, planning it out together, including a seated area, and identified a need for shelter. They planned to build a green hub and applied to the postcode lottery for funding. They worked with a great craftsman who taught them how to do it together. They had a launch of the garden and green hub with the local MSP, members of the local church and local community members. They are adapting to Covid-19 restrictions and still working out how to adapt the learning space and programme of events that were planned.

The people involved feel surprised about what they’ve done together. At the same time there is an important feeling of resilience – of seeing what’s possible – and a sense that everyone had a role to play. The project has been important for **overcoming a sense of isolation** that many feel.

The project brought everyone together, **helped confidence start to build**, and meant that people **learnt new skills** – e.g. woodworking. Although there are challenges associated with COVID, which prevent people engaging and learning in the space and reduced capacity, they know that the garden will be there for a long time. They have learned that sometimes you need to make your own opportunity and just take a chance even if you don’t know the whole plan.

## Story 6 – Working in partnership to build trust

David Meechan, Senior Project Officer, North Ayrshire Green Health Partnership, shared the work he had done to develop a green gym and establish it in the Ayrshire and Ailsa Hospital grounds. A green gym provides outdoor physical activity and includes activities such as gardening. The project took several years to get up and running, including working strategically to understand where there was a hospital site with suitable grounds and where cardiac rehabilitation services were strong. This involved working with the government. They then needed to take time to build relationships with the physiotherapists and other professionals so that they knew and trusted the service and knew how to refer.

They ran the project initially with 4 people over a 6 week block and then slowly built from there up to a group of 10 people, changing over time, coming from different rehabilitation departments. **Social connections** were the biggest outcome for participants. Participants enjoyed the fact that the group was for people with different conditions and they didn’t feel pigeon holed. Being amongst peers was important. It **stopped them feeling alone**. It was hard and time consuming to set up. Lots of liaison was required with the physios as the green gym team were not clinical and therefore needed to keep in close touch about people’s requirements and changing needs. Having **invested health professionals was vital to success**.

## Learning from success stories to inform the green health prescribing project

Each story shared helped us to understand different aspects of what makes an individual project work. We took key aspects from these stories, and other comments people made during the breakout sessions, to develop learning using the contribution story headings below. This helped us understand what needs to be in place to embed green health prescribing across the system and make it inclusive and sustainable.



### What we do

There were common activities that were found to be an important part of the success stories and each of the groups of the workshop identified the following actions that enable the projects, or others to be successful.

- **Listen and understand:** tap into motivation, understand challenges, make space for good conversations across the system
- **Develop responses to local and individual needs:** co-design and collaborate, local provision eg community garden around GP practice, focus on what matters to individuals, use range of activities for individuals and groups, have recognisable spaces where people can see the improvement resulting from activities
- **Promote green health activities and green health prescribing in the right way to the right people:** local relationships, word of mouth, informal approach, network; attend key meetings to discuss and promote (such as GP cluster meetings); keep language simple, communicate effectively; leadership, personalities, trusted people; whole team involved, not just the enthusiasts; use range of media – videos, social media as well as well-designed physical resources; exploit visual power of nature; use existing networks (eg Edinburgh’s self-management Community of Practice, Red Cross calendar)

- **Provide good support & information;** anticipate barriers and provide solutions eg buddying to “get people through the gate”; recognise value of peer support and volunteers; support providers with risk assessments
- **Start small, learn and grow:** successful projects often start small as tests of change or meeting of minds; build in some form of evaluation right from the start to help understand what works well; the process will take time

## Who with

There are a wide range of people that each of the stories worked with and the workshop contributors had an even wider set of connection. However the following groups were identified as key to the success of green health prescribing.

- **Putting participants at the centre:** the people taking part are often the best advocates who can get across the most compelling messages about the benefits; the most successful programmes respond to and meet the needs of the participants
- **Thinking broadly about who are the potential prescribers:** there is a wide range of potential prescribers and we should engage with a wide range of stakeholders; making the most of any opportunity to make connections and identify the potential of green health activities to improve physical and mental health and address social isolation; in primary care settings, Community Link Workers/Health and Wellbeing Practitioners are key to engaging with those who could benefit most; Social care workers have opportunities to enable connection to green health activities particularly because they often work alongside families for weeks and months
- **Connecting with a wide range of activity providers:** third sector organisations generally (not just green health activity providers); volunteers; community organisations
- **Working across the system:** to get buy-in across the system it is useful to work with a really wide range of people; local community champions are critical; strategic leadership; other local organisations and faith groups can provide key connections; MSPs & MPs & local Councillors can be crucial allies; statutory bodies such as NatureScot and other parts of Scottish Government can open doors.

## How they feel

The way that projects make people feel is a really important determinant of their success. Much of the learning so far shows that it is personal connections that make a difference to the success of green health prescribing projects. The following feelings have been described by both participants, prescribers and providers:

- **Supported:** they didn’t feel pigeon-holed or alone; feelings of resilience, and of seeing what’s possible, are important
- **Connected:** a sense of community spirit; part of a team where everyone had a role to play; surprised about what we’ve done together; overcome sense of isolation - social connections were one of the biggest outcomes for participants
- **More energy, feeling good about it;** improved mental health with reduced sense of anxiety

## **What they learn and gain**

The groups discussed what the people, prescribers and providers learn during successful projects, the following were agreed to be important:

- To make something work, it is crucial to engage across the system, embed it in the community, and build on local knowledge.
- Knowledge about local activities and connections benefit a wide range of people, in some case these were as beneficial to the prescribers as they were to the participants.
- Communicating across different sectors is really important and not always easy, it takes time to develop a shared language and methods
- A shared understanding of the needs and challenges of the different sectors helps people understand how the system works and what their role in it is
- A shared vision is critical so that everyone is working towards the same outcomes
- There are lots of opportunities to develop more referral pathways and lots of different ways to meet people's needs
- Building trust in other organisations and individuals is key to the sustainability of projects
- Being open to change by being flexible and adaptable means that you can respond to needs but this takes resilience and patience.

## **What they (would) do differently**

During the workshop, the discussion often steered towards what everyone would do differently if they could, rather than what they currently do. This section summarises that discussion:

- Share more stories of success between each other and key partners
- Identify champions and use them to promote the projects
- Connect more projects to share resources, for example volunteers in one project go on to support others
- Build a community of practice – a network with shared values, shared vision, shared resources
- Share more information about what's available

## **What difference does it make?**

During the workshop, the discussion touched on the hoped-for outcomes for green health prescribing. The two that emerged from these discussions were resilient communities, and that people are as well as they can be, both in terms of health and social connections. The next stage of the development work will look into these outcomes in more detail.

